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Kroese Lectures on the Christian and Modern Film

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Man should be viewed as more than a biological being, one that simply responds to stimuli, he continued, and communications should be seen as more than the discriminatory response of an organism to a stimulus. Rather, communications is a "symbolic process of creating meaningfulness."

"Communications is the process of building and reaffirming symbols," postulated Christians. This definition recognized that man is made in the image of God, as a creative being.

So important are symbols, said Christians, that one can understand the history of civilizations by understanding the history of the media, the history of man's making symbols. In the first stage man communicated solely through speech. The human voice united society. He showed how the second stage, the print stage, brought about such things as individualism, regularity in thought and the ability to control huge empires. The third, electronic age started about 1957-1960, when the whole world communally observed Sputnik

and President Kennedy's funeral. Communications and much else is now electronically oriented.

But in this electronic age, the media should recognize the "transcendent," what does not appear to be observable, rational or empirical, said Christians. If man can understand that life is more than what one observes—contrary to what television programs like "Maude" would have one think—then for example, he might be able to communicate with most Christians without asking such elementary questions as "Who is God?" or "Can we possibly be responsible to anyone else but ourselves?"

Dr. Christians graduated from Dordt in 1959, from Calvin College in 1961 and Calvin Theological Seminary in 1964. Fuller Theological Seminary granted him a Th.M., and he earned a masters in social linguistics from the University of Southern California. Finally, he received a Ph.D. in mass communications from the University of Illinois.

by Randall Palmer

Kroese Lectures on the Christian and Modern Film

As part of the 1975-76 Fine Arts program at Dordt, Dr. Irvin Kroese of Calvin College lectured on the Christian community and contemporary film. In his lecture, Kroese commented that paradox mostly characterizes the Christian community's attitude toward the film.

Kroese went on to list several of these paradoxes. Most of us feel, he said, that the movies are singularly worldly, yet there is no other art form "which has so consistently and affirmatively dealt with religious and moral issues," no art form in which "the search for God and for a basis for moral values has been quite so prominent and direct."

A second paradox is that the film, in trying to affirm human values, may use the shocking to communicate this moral imperative, and all too often the Christian community, according to Kroese, fails to see beyond the shocking. "We don't recognize the difference between sin-in-the-cinema and sinful-cinema," said Kroese.

"The irony in all this is that we cannot seem to recognize when the movies are on our side, and we often reject exactly those movies whose attitudes are most humane, rejecting them for the very reason that they should be accepted."

Kroese then asked how the Christian community might develop a more balanced

attitude toward films. He suggested that perhaps here--our college campuses--might be the best place to watch movies, to "take them on their own grounds, make thoughtful judgments about them, recognize their failures and strengths," and articulate our beliefs in their light. Our evasion of the responsibility to grapple with this aspect of our world, the responsibility to bring the concept of redemption to bear on this area of culture and art, because of our timidity or false deference or false piety, said Kroese, is a greater corruption of Christian purity than we are likely to suffer from anything that springs at us from a movie screen.

A third paradox developed by Kroese was that the film, arising out of a materialistic, positivistic, and secular age, and assumed to be the best recorder of objective, material reality, is, in fact, an explorer of the abstract and symbolic. "It is its almost total command of physical reality that enables it to invest physical imagery with significance far beyond the physical," said Kroese. "Every object may carry a charge beyond itself and have bearing upon every other object in a universe concretely and realistically perceived, yet wholly symbolic,

mythical, or sacramental," making the film such an outstanding medium for exploring the inherently religious character of reality. Illustrating then from a number of contemporary directors, Kroese explained how "these film-makers know that their cameras probe inward and not outward." It is exactly this capability of film to break the hold of secular empiricism that makes it capable of bringing, said Kroese, "the redemption of spiritual reality," or bringing back a sense of sacred, sacramental presence.

In subsequent seminars, Kroese led the audience in a discussion of Bunuel's The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie and Bergman's Cries and Whispers. Especially the latter film provoked discussion. While the audience did not always agree with Dr. Kroese's interpretation of these films, there is no doubt that his visit brought the audience to a greater awareness of the possibilities of film as an art form, and how contemporary film-makers have used it to communicate an intensely religious view of reality. To that end, Dr. Kroese's visit helped to develop the more discriminating, Christian viewing of film that he called for.

by Hugh Cook